

**Testimony of
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Freedom**

**At a Hearing Entitled:
The Plight of Religious Minorities in the Middle East: Can
Religious Pluralism Survive?**

**House International Relations Committee
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and
International Operations**

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Chairman Smith, Mr. Lantos, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you regarding the very important subject of religious minorities in the Middle East. I want to commend this Subcommittee's continuing interest in promoting religious freedom around the globe, and yours in particular, Mr. Chairman. The work of the Committee raises the profile of this issue enormously, which in turn helps me and others in the Administration to be even more effective in our work to promote and protect religious freedom.

President Bush and Secretary Rice are deeply concerned about the plight of religious minorities in many countries around the world. Just two weeks ago Secretary Rice spoke eloquently of the tragedy that exists when "people of faith can only whisper to God in the silent sanctuaries of their conscience because they fear persecution." Highlighting America's special privilege in this regard, she asked, "If America does not rally support for people everywhere who desire to worship in peace and freedom, then I ask you: who will?" Religious freedom demands moral clarity, and Secretary Rice has been steadfast in asserting that no government "has the right to stand between the individual and the Almighty."

As Ambassador at Large, I feel a special obligation to bring the weight of my office, and the authority of the U.S. Government, to bear in

assisting persecuted believers, wherever they are, and I have been impressed by the widespread conviction within the Administration of the importance of this mission. The conditions faced by minority religious groups vary greatly, and a detailed account of conditions in each country of the world can be found in the State Department's *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom*. There are countries, of course, where believers of all faiths are persecuted—North Korea being perhaps the most extreme example. But in most places where religious freedom is not respected, it is the members of minority faiths who suffer both governmental and societal discrimination and persecution.

With regard to minority religious groups in the Middle East, conditions vary enormously from country to country. While religious minorities in many countries of the region, including Lebanon, Bahrain, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, enjoy a substantial degree of freedom to worship openly, the region also contains two of the eight named Countries of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act. These two countries are Iran and Saudi Arabia, where restrictions on religious practice are among the most severe in the world. Certain minorities with historical roots in the region—including some Christian denominations and minority Muslim groups—have developed a *modus vivendi* in many Middle

Eastern countries, while members of other religions—especially some Protestant Christian denominations and the Baha’i—face severe limitations, discrimination, and even persecution across the region.

Many countries in the Middle East, including Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen provide for freedom of religion or worship in their constitution or basic law. In practice, however, strict limitations remain in place across the region on such activities as proselytizing and conversion, and many governments openly discriminate against members of minority religions. In addition, societal attitudes with regard to religious minorities often result in abuse and discrimination that goes unchecked by governments, and in some cases is condoned and encouraged by governments. These, and other factors, have resulted in a declining Christian population in the region over recent decades, with the exception of the Arab Christian population in Israel.

Before turning to a description of the Administration’s efforts to advance religious freedom in the region, I would first describe the conditions for religious minorities Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Egypt.

Iran

Let me turn now to Iran, which was first designated a Country of Particular Concern in 1999 for its severe violations of religious freedom. Iran's religious minorities include Sunni and Sufi Muslims, Baha'is, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians. The Iranian Government's actions and rhetoric continue to create a threatening atmosphere for religious minorities, and in the past year we have witnessed an even further deterioration of the already poor status of religious freedom for the Baha'is and Sufi Muslims. Following the June 2005 election of President Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad, the Government-controlled media intensified negative campaigns against religious minorities, particularly the Baha'i.

Iran's constitution declares that "the official religion of Iran is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'fari (Twelver) Shi'ism." The constitution also states that "within the limits of law," Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities who are guaranteed freedom to practice their religion; however, in reality, members of even these recognized religious minority groups have reported imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on their religious beliefs. Non-Shia Muslim groups, including Sunni and Sufi Muslims, are also targets for government intimidation. Prominent Sufi leaders have reported harassment by the intelligence and security services,

and in the past year government restrictions on Sufi groups and houses of worship have become more pronounced. For example, hundreds of demonstrators, including women and children, were injured when police and organized pro-government groups broke up a peaceful protest by Nematollahi Sufi Muslims in Qom, Iran, in February. Some 1,200 were reportedly detained and taken away in buses to an unknown location.

Sunni Muslims are the largest religious minority in the country. The constitution provides Sunni Muslims a large degree of religious freedom. In practice Sunni Muslims claimed that the government discriminated against Sunnis. As an example, Sunnis cited the lack of a Sunni mosque in the nation's capital, Tehran, despite over a million Sunni inhabitants.

Iran's hostility to the Baha'i community is of growing concern. The Baha'i faith is regarded by the Government as a heretical Islamic group with a political orientation that is antagonistic to the country's Islamic revolution. While government officials have stated that, as individuals, all Baha'is are entitled to their beliefs and are protected under the articles of the constitution as citizens, the Government continues to prohibit the Baha'is from teaching and practicing their faith. Baha'is are barred from holding government posts and face discrimination in the university system and in the workplace.

Baha'is repeatedly have been offered relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their faith.

The Iranian regime is also alleged to monitor the activities of the Baha'is. In March of this year, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief became aware of a secret October 2005 letter from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i to the Ministry of Information, the Revolutionary Guard, and the Police Force, which requested the agencies to collect information about members of the Baha'i faith. There were also reports that the Association of Chambers of Commerce compiled a list of Baha'i members and their trades and employment.

The Administration makes clear its objections to the Iranian regime's harsh and oppressive treatment of religious minorities through public statements, support for relevant U.N. and nongovernmental organization efforts, as well as diplomatic initiatives to press for an end to government abuses. On numerous occasions the State Department spokesman has publicly addressed the situation of the Baha'is. The Administration has also condemned the treatment of the Baha'i in U.N. resolutions, including one that passed in the General Assembly this past March. The U.S. encourages other governments to take similar actions, and repeats its call to those

countries with bilateral relations with Iran to use those ties to press Iran on religious freedom and human rights.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia was first designated a Country of Particular Concern in 2004, and it remains so today. In Saudi Arabia, no legal provision providing for or protecting religious freedom exists by international standards.

Muslims who do not conform to the official version of Islam can be subject to discrimination and harassment, and sometimes abuse or imprisonment.

Shi'a Muslims, in particular, suffer from discrimination in the political, economic and educational spheres. Although private worship by non-Muslims is generally permitted, public worship is prohibited. And the state-controlled organization known officially as the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) – otherwise known as the religious police, or “*Mutawwa'in*” – has harassed, imprisoned, and abused Muslims and non-Muslims alike who do not conform to its strict codes for behavior, dress, and worship.

I should also note a particular challenge in addressing religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is the spiritual center of the Muslim world and hosts Islam's holiest sites in Mecca and Medina. The Saudi

government views its most basic duty - and the source of its legitimacy - to be the guardianship of the holy sites, maintenance and promotion of its interpretation of Islam and Islamic law, and hosting the annual Muslim pilgrimage, the Hajj. Islam is at the center of Saudi Arabia's national identity and pervades all aspects of national life. In addition, the idea of separation of church (or mosque) and state is not accepted by the vast majority of the population. I say this simply to provide some context and to illustrate the particular difficulty we face in promoting religious freedom in the Kingdom.

The majority of citizens are Sunni Muslims who predominantly adhere to the very strict Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence, the strictest of Sunni Islam's four legal schools. Religious minorities among the citizens of Saudi Arabia include Shi'a Muslims, Sulaimani Ismailis, a subset of Shi'a Islam, and Sufi Muslims. More than 7 million expatriates live and work in the Kingdom and the majority of expatriates are Muslims from the various branches and interpretations of Islam, or Christians, Hindus and Buddhists. Every year, the Kingdom hosts more than 2 million Muslims for the annual Hajj.

As religious freedom is not a provided or protected right for any one in the Kingdom, citizens and expatriates are vulnerable to harassment, arrest,

detention and possibly, abuse or torture for behaving according to the dictates of their conscience. Most non-Muslims are able to worship privately in their homes in the Kingdom, and raids on private worship have decreased but still occur occasionally. Four East African Christians were recently arrested by the religious police for leading a private worship ceremony in a rented building. Shi'a Muslims are still restricted in observing Ashura publicly and in building places of worship. Shi'a Muslims also suffer from discrimination and many Shi'a believed that openly identifying themselves as Shi'a would have a negative impact on career advancement. Citizens are also vulnerable to accusations of insulting the nation or religion and formal charges of blasphemy by the courts.

King Abdullah has led an active campaign in Saudi Arabia and in the Muslim World to condemn extremism and encourage greater tolerance. Earlier in June the King gave a speech in the Qassim region, a very conservative part of the country, and urged greater religious tolerance and admonished those who spread dissension among Muslims. At the Organization of the Islamic Conference summit meeting in Mecca, Saudi Arabia played a leading role in condemning extremism, encouraging greater tolerance and solving many of the problems plaguing the Muslim world such as poverty and weak education. The Kingdom has also established two new

human rights organizations, which include both Sunni, Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims.

The U.S. government has consistently and forcefully advocated for religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. Ambassador Oberwetter has made advancing religious freedom and tolerance a priority for the U.S. Mission to Saudi Arabia. Senior officials, including myself, have engaged with senior Saudi officials when violations of religious freedom occur and have frequently engaged them on the problem of the dissemination of intolerant literature and extremist ideology both within Saudi Arabia and around the world.

Iraq

Just a few years ago, conditions for religious minorities in Iraq were remarkably similar to those in Iran. In Iraq today, however, it is the Government's policy to respect the rights of all religious groups to gather and worship freely, and in practice it does not place or tolerate restrictions on the rights of minority religious groups to practice their faith. The designation of Iraq as a Country of Particular Concern was lifted in 2004.

While much has been accomplished in Iraq, we recognize the unfortunate reality that acts of terror, the ongoing insurgency, and sectarian

violence have impeded the ability of some minority religious groups to fully practice their faith. We are concerned about reports that some members of religious minority communities have been targeted as victims of harassment, societal discrimination, and violence. The coordinated car bomb attacks this past January on six Christian churches and the Vatican embassy in Baghdad and Kirkuk, were particularly troubling. Sectarian attacks and reprisals following the February 22 bombing of the Askariya Shrine in Samarra – one of the holiest Shi'a religious sites in Iraq – are estimated to have claimed more than 1,000 lives and damaged more than 60 mosques across Iraq. Those who attacked the Askariya Shrine sought to exploit divisions among the Iraqi public and the political leadership and sow sectarian strife. Iraqi government and religious leaders alike, in a demonstration of national unity, condemned the attacks and called for an end to sectarian unrest.

However, against this backdrop of sectarian violence and terrorist activity aimed at derailing the establishment of a government under the new constitution, Iraq's leaders and the Iraqi people achieved a critical milestone on May 20, 2006 by completing the government formation process. Iraqi leaders came together in agreement on a national unity government despite the efforts of insurgents and terrorists.

The Iraqi constitution, which came into effect on May 20, is a significant accomplishment that lays a strong foundation for the protection of the rights of minority religious communities. Like the Transitional Administrative Law before it, the constitution provides many guarantees, including the right of every individual to “freedom of thought, conscience, and belief.” And while the constitution provides for the Islamic identity of the majority of the Iraqi people, it also protects the rights of religious minorities by specifically mentioning Christians and other religious groups. Article two of the constitution guarantees the “full religious rights of freedom of belief and practice for all individuals such as Christians, Yazidis, and Mandeans Sabians.” The constitution establishes a framework for protecting minority religious groups by not only explicitly protecting freedom of religion, but by also guaranteeing other rights that are essential for religious minorities, such as the protection of places of worship, and the freedoms of assembly, association, conscience and expression.

Although Iraq now has a democratically elected government in place, major political challenges lie ahead, including the passage of enabling legislation for the constitution, and a constitutional amendment process. The process of the constitution’s interpretation, implementation, and possible amendment will also be important. In our ongoing dialogue with Iraqi

authorities, we will continue to encourage them to interpret and implement the constitution in a manner that protects the rights of Iraq's religious minorities. We will also continue supporting Iraqi efforts to strengthen the rule of law and ensure an independent and impartial judicial system.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom problems with the government of Iraq as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Senior U.S. Administration and Embassy officials called for unity in the face of sectarian violence, supported the inclusion of religious minorities in the political and constitution drafting processes, and facilitated interfaith discussion with all members of the country's diverse religious communities. To this end, U.S. officials at every level, including Secretary Rice, Ambassador Khalilzad, and our Embassy officers regularly engage Iraqi officials and leaders of religious organizations on the problems faced by the minority religious groups. Our Embassy has facilitated interfaith discussions and hosted meetings, roundtables, and exchange programs with the goal of promoting religious understanding and tolerance. In addition, U.S.-funded projects have worked with religious minorities by bringing together members of different religious and ethnic backgrounds to discuss common problems. We are committed to promoting religious tolerance and greater inclusion of minority religious communities in Iraqi national life.

Egypt

In Egypt there is discrimination against religious minorities, including Coptic Christians, and members of religions that are not recognized by the Government experience personal and collective hardship. Notwithstanding this, however, the Government has increased its overtures to the large Coptic Christian population in recent years. At the beginning of the year, a Copt was appointed as governor of Qena, one of the twenty-seven governorates, the first such appointment in over thirty years. The president of the National Council on Human Rights, created by the Government in 2004, is a Coptic Christian, as are five of the 25 members. The Council has formed a 'Citizenship Committee' with a focus on religious freedom. In May of this year, President Mubarak named a Coptic Christian among seven judges appointed to the Supreme Constitutional Court. And in December of last year, President Mubarak issued a new decree aimed at facilitating church repair and rebuilding, an effort to resolve a longstanding grievance of Coptic and other Christians in Egypt. Unfortunately, church and lay leaders have noted both publicly and privately that this decree, like its recent predecessors, has proven largely ineffective as local level officials continue to obstruct the issuance of the permits needed to perform maintenance, make

repairs or rebuild. More broadly, Christians continue to face both official and societal prejudice, and sectarian tensions and even violence continue to flare up at times across the country. While there are no laws prohibiting conversion from Islam, security officials have been known to harass Christians who have converted from Islam.

Religious groups that have not been able to obtain official recognition also face serious problems in Egypt. Shi'a Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormons are among those groups that have not been able to obtain official recognition and, as a result, sometimes face harassment from members of the security services. The Baha'is, in particular, have suffered discrimination after being stripped of legal recognition in the early 1960s. The Government continues to deny civil documents, including identity cards, birth certificates and marriage licenses to members of the Baha'i community, and appealed a decision last April by the Administrative Court supporting the right of Baha'i citizens to receive documents.

Nevertheless, the Egyptian Government has taken some steps to encourage greater tolerance for some minority faith groups. Interfaith dialogues have been sponsored by prominent Muslim and Christian groups, government-owned television has allowed some Christian programming, and

the President has made several public statements urging support for minority groups.

The subject of religious freedom is an important part of our bilateral dialogue with the Egyptian Government, as well as with academics, businessmen and women, and Egyptian citizens with whom we have contact throughout the country. The Secretary, the Ambassador, and other senior U.S. officials have pressed for reforms, and the Ambassador has made public statements supporting interfaith understanding and efforts toward harmony and equality among citizens of all faiths. My office has worked closely with our Embassy to specifically raise our concerns with the Government about official discrimination against Baha'is. The United States supports the development of programs and materials that encourage tolerance.

Additional U.S. Efforts

Mr. Chairman, as the discussion of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Egypt illustrates, the Middle East poses a significant challenge to us as we seek to promote religious freedom. Yet in a region where so many key national interests come together—geopolitical, strategic, economic, humanitarian, and of course human rights—my experience has been that there is

unanimous agreement that religious freedom needs to be among the key concerns we raise.

You asked me to focus today in particular on the status of religious minorities in the region. But I want to make clear that the issue of religious freedom in the Middle East, and our efforts to promote it, extend well beyond religious minorities even to members of majority religious groups. Even in Muslim-majority countries such as those in the Middle East, many Muslims are not free to practice as they please. Muslims in the United States tell me that they have more freedom to worship according to the dictates of their conscience and beliefs here than they had in their country of origin.

True religious freedom requires respect for minority faiths. But it also requires respect for differences within a particular faith. And it requires the ability to change one's faith. In many countries in the Middle East, all of these elements of religious freedom are lacking, for all people. It is for these reasons, as well as the suffering of so many who are being persecuted for their beliefs, that there is broad agreement throughout the U.S. Government on the far-reaching importance of religious freedom to our policy of promoting reform in the Middle East. Religious freedom constitutes a core

element of our effort to promote democracy and human rights more broadly in the region.

Throughout the region, we are actively engaged with governments and civil society organizations, working with them to promote greater tolerance, interfaith understanding, and, ultimately, freedom for members of all faiths to practice according to the dictates of their conscience. In addition to the efforts I mentioned above, let me give you a few additional examples.

In the United Arab Emirates, U.S. Embassy officials meet regularly with the Under Secretary of Islamic Affairs to discuss religious freedom and tolerance, and last October the Embassy brought Imam Yahya Hendi, from Georgetown University, to speak about Islam in the United States, the importance of establishing an interfaith dialogue, and religious tolerance.

Our Embassy in Oman helped organize a program on interfaith dialogue for the Omani Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs during a recent visit. Likewise, our Embassy in Kuwait sent two Kuwaiti imams to the United States in a focused effort to demonstrate the scope of religious freedom here and to encourage the promotion of tolerance and inter-faith understanding. In Jordan, the Embassy sent religious scholars, including the Grand Mufti, to the United States for the same purpose, funded an interfaith conference designed to promote greater tolerance, and continued its multi-

phase exchange program that brings U.S. religious leaders to Jordan and Jordanian imams to the United States.

Finally, in Bahrain, the United States funded “Arab Civitas” to help the Ministry of Education develop a civic education program for public schools which includes lessons on human rights and tolerance.

These are just a few examples of the ways that we are seeking to promote greater tolerance and freedom in the Middle East. There is much more to be done, and we continue to look for new ways to address this critical issue.

It is my commitment, and I know it is the commitment of both the President and Secretary Rice, to continue to actively advance our efforts to promote tolerance and freedom in this region over the coming years.

Mr. Chairman, I know you and your Colleagues feel as fervently as does Secretary Rice about this issue. Thank you for holding this hearing and for your commitment to religious freedom. I would be happy to take any questions you might have.

